

PROFESSIONAL READING? OR THE CASE OF LIBRARIAN DETECTIVES IN MYSTERY FICTION

by Jennifer Burek Pierce



In real life, reference librarians field a wide range of questions; in fiction, librarians-turned-amateur sleuths take on the classic murder question, “Whodunnit?” in addition to their library duties. A number of mystery series have come to feature crime-solving librarians. The prevalence of these librarian-as-detective books, including the Aurora “Roe” Teagarden mysteries by Charlaine Harris and the Claire Reynier mysteries by Judith Van Gieson,¹ encourages consideration of features of the fictional librarian in her role as sleuth.

This article examines selected murder mysteries by contemporary U.S. authors which rely on librarians as amateur detectives. How is the profession depicted in these mass market novels? What, in other words, is the image of the present-day librarian as presented in amateur detective stories?

THE LITERATURE ON LIBRARIANS’ IMAGES: FICTION AND REALITY

It has been noted that “librarianship is characterized by pervasive anxiety about its image and identity” as evidenced in part by researchers who “undertake such tasks as monitoring the popular media for portrayals of unflattering occupational stereotypes.”² Among those who write about the image of the librarian, Radford and Radford’s postmodern theory-driven work stands out. Radford and Radford articulate the image of the librarian as one more strongly influenced by stereotypes rather than by professional realities. They describe this stereotypical librarian as female and characterized by features with negative associations, such as being plain, single, and preferring quiet to conversation.³ These negative aspects of the professional stereotype are also acknowledged in an earlier article which sees the library and the librarian as entities to be feared.⁴

The literature on librarians’ images also analyzes the work and ideas of actual librarians. A recent survey for the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) concluded that real librarians suffer from image problems as much as the fictional

ones described by Radford and Radford do. The results of this survey demonstrate that at least one aspect of the stereotype is factual – that the profession of librarianship is associated with women. Additional image problems of the profession are elaborated this way:

As far as the general public is concerned, the librarian’s occupation is largely invisible. To the average user, the librarian is virtually indistinguishable from other library staff. In addition to this, the public have almost no idea what it is a librarian actually does since a great deal of the work, such as collection management, is done out of sight of the users.⁵

These issues converge in the depiction of librarians as amateur sleuths in contemporary detective fiction. Two female detectives in particular are evocative of the image issues identified by scholars in this area.

IMAGE PROBLEMS: THE AMATEUR IN THE STACKS

Charlaine Harris’s Aurora Teagarden mysteries feature library employee Aurora “Roe” Teagarden. One of the first facts we learn about this protagonist – beyond her interest in historical crimes and her physical description – is that her professional life “fulfilled her childhood dream of becoming a librarian.”⁶ While the Teagarden books sometimes offer a degree of verisimilitude in acknowledging that the field is dominated by women and that budgets are strained, the development of Roe’s character and profession draws heavily on stereotypes of the librarian.

This stereotyping begins with her physical appearance. Roe tells the reader that she “wears round tortoise-rimmed glasses” and “a plain blouse and skirt” to work.⁷ Elsewhere, more detail on this librarian’s garb is offered: Roe wears “a solid navy skirt of neutral length with a navy-and-white striped blouse, plain support hose, and unattractive but very comfortable shoes.”⁸ In her self-reflections, she characterizes herself as “a quiet librarian.”⁹ Eventually, a clothing store owner aids Roe in a sartorial make-over: “Under Mrs. Day’s influence, I’d begun to weed out my librarian clothes, my solid-color interchangeable blouses and skirts.”¹⁰

This wardrobe revision responds to Roe's life as a singleton. She is seemingly befuddled by her recent rediscovery of men and seeks a friend's help in sorting things out. As she tells us, "The nuances and dose-yes-between the sexes were Amina's bread and butter. I hadn't had anything like this to tell Amina since we were in high school."¹¹ Upon seeing a couple arrive together at a meeting, Roe reflects, "It did cross my mind to feel sorry for myself that Melanie Clark had a date and I always arrived ... by myself, but I didn't want to get all gloomy."¹² Later, when she sees the couple together again as she works through her Sunday chores, she thinks about her single status again: "What did I have to look forward to? I asked myself rhetorically. 60 Minutes and heated up pot roast."¹³ The spinster theme is repeated in the second book in the series, where Roe reacts to the news that a former beau is getting married: "I saw green for envy, I saw red for rage, I saw blue for depression. I would never get married, I decided, I would just go to other people's weddings for the rest of my life."¹⁴ More problematic than the evocation of personality stereotypes in creating this character, though, is the fact that the job of librarian in these books likewise appears to be derived from stereotypes.

Despite her self-declared long-interest in librarianship, Roe seems little acquainted with the profession. While she mentions having attended college, she makes no mention of having been to library school.¹⁵ Perhaps then it should not be surprising that her duties at the library are often clerical ones. One day at the library finds Roe "reshelving books that had been checked in."¹⁶ That this is normal rather than exceptional is evident when she adds, "Lillian Schmidt, another librarian, was shelving books a few stacks away."¹⁷ On a day when she hopes to kill time until her shift is over, Roe "hid among the books all morning, reading the shelves, dusting, and piddling along."¹⁸ She has no job title and seems to hop wildly about the library from task to task. One day she spends hours shelving, the next she is repairing worn volumes in the back room.

While Roe explains her assorted on-the-job tasks by stating that the library staff is "too small to permit much specialization," her knowledge of librarians' responsibilities simply seems lacking. Despite her participation in a club which pursues information on historical murders, when she needs information about a particular case, she almost seems relieved to hand it over to another individual (a retired school librarian and volunteer at the public library) simply because Jane Engle "had a larger personal collection."¹⁹ When an acquaintance confronts her at work – interrupting the interminable shelving — with the question, "Have you read this book on bargello?" Roe's response fails to show any familiarity with reader's advisory practices:

I blinked and recovered. "Now Sally, I can't sew on a button. You'd have to ask Mother if you want to know

about needlework. Or Lillian," I added brilliantly, as my co-worker wheeled her own cart past the other end of the stack.²⁰

Roe offers a simplistic, almost child-like explanation of working with the public:

I usually enjoyed my tour in Circulation. I got to stand at the big desk to one side of the main entrance. I answered questions and accepted the books, taking the fines if the books were overdue, sliding the cards back in and putting them on book carts for transportation back to their shelves. Or I checked the books out."²¹

Roe later provides another description of an afternoon shift, saying, "I was on the checkout/check-in desk for three hours, making idle conversation with the patrons."²² In these and other references to her professional obligations, Roe never serves on the reference desk, researches challenging questions, manages the collection, or catalogs. Computer technology does not figure at all in the library in these novels, published in the early 1990s.

Most disturbingly, though, Roe fails to demonstrate knowledge of library functions that have the potential to reveal who the murderer is. When a would-be reader tells her that all nonfiction items relating to murder are checked out, she first considers that others in the historical murders club might have them, then suspects that the murderer, who patterns crimes based on famous cases, might indeed be the researcher. Roe's reaction, instead of wondering about violating patron confidentiality to see who has the books, is this: "That was sickening. I looked it in the face for a second, then had to turn away. I could not visualize, did not dare to visualize, someone I knew pouring over books, trying to select what old murder to imitate next."²³ At this point in the story, and in subsequent ones which should rely increasingly on behind-the-scenes knowledge of libraries, the constraints of the plot are sorely tested by the author's reliance on stereotypes.

In the character of librarian Roe Teagarden, readers are offered a superficial rendition of the librarian. Her professional skills do not aid her in solving the murder of the woman whose body she found. Instead, reliance on the image of the "stamping and shelving spinster" librarian results in a weak narrative and an untenable career choice for Roe.²⁴ The depiction of this character's work life echoes the worst findings in much of the library literature about image problems in the profession.

IMAGES OF THE PROFESSION: ON THE ROAD AND ON THE 'NET

Judith Van Gieson's Claire Reynier mysteries involve the efforts of her protagonist, a librarian responsible for collection development for a university

research center, to solve crimes involving books and libraries. Set in the desert Southwest, these books also fall in the genre of regional mystery fiction. Van Gieson presents Claire's professional qualifications and her personality before her looks, and these narratives ultimately reflect a more grounded awareness of the library profession.

This librarian-turned-sleuth is a credentialed one. Claire, readers learn, attended library school at the University of Arizona. She is described as "the head of collection development,"²⁵ but she has a supervisor and no staff of her own to supervise in turn. Her responsibilities range from research and acquisitions to the pragmatic problems of transporting collection items. This situation means Claire has a measure of independence acquired only "after years of having to account for every minute of her time."²⁶

Some personal background is also offered about this character. She is adept with computers, using them for avocational interests like electronic games of solitaire as well as for work-related needs like emailing book collectors and researching the availability of rare books.²⁷ She has a grown family, including an ex-husband.²⁸ It was because of him, rather than her profession, that she adopted "more subdued" clothing and "a quiet, professional style."²⁹ Claire is not young. Readers are not told her age but are given descriptions indicating she is somewhat older than 50, including this passage:

At this point in life, how good she looked depended on the light. In a diffuse light her hair was blonde. In daylight it was silver. In soft light she had fine wrinkles. In hard light her face was a road map of an overcrowded city.³⁰ Her tai chi practice and her cat, Nemesis, are among the other details which characterize this protagonist.

Her work life is not intended to reflect the working conditions of every librarian. Claire's job is referred to as "a dream spot," researching and purchasing rare books.³¹ Nonetheless, there are indicators about what actual librarians do for a living, even as Claire works to resolve the mystery of the stolen books. There are descriptions of her attending meetings and interacting with colleagues,³² of those colleagues' advanced degrees and other credentials,³³ and of decision-making regarding collections and special exhibits.³⁴

It is perhaps her decision-making and her knowledge that most distinguishes Claire as a professional librarian. She sometimes travels to do her work. When she acquires a collection of rare books, Claire acknowledges the importance of its artifacts and its value to her career: "It was a collection any library would be proud to own, and it would be a coup for her to bring it in."³⁵ She is readily able to promise recognition to the benefactor, evaluate an inventory list, and identify

mistakes regarding publication information.³⁶ She can assess the value of items in the collection and recognize significant authors.³⁷ She outlines online search strategies and develops ways of acquiring information which she does not already know how to find.³⁸ These traits and evidence of learning are important to creating an positive and realistic image of the librarian as a professional in Van Gieson's books.

In creating the character of Claire Reynier, Van Gieson begins to modify stereotypes of library professionals presented in popular fiction. This character calls attention to the need for education and intellectual acumen in order to solve information problems, and the series featuring her gives some attention to the behind-the-scenes work done in libraries. While stopping short of depicting the demands of more typical library jobs, such as reference work or cataloging, the Claire Reynier mysteries reflect more professional, less stereotypical images of librarians. It is in these recent novels that the librarian-sleuth begins to call attention to some of the aptitudes and the skills needed for library work, applying these traits in pursuit of both professional and criminal problems.

CONCLUSION

Whereas Harris depicts the profession as dull and amorphous in its responsibilities, Van Gieson suggests that librarians are educated, skilled individuals who use knowledge to make decisions that aid others and themselves. Harris's Roe is someone who is largely occupied with clerical tasks, fails to enjoy collegial relationships with many of her coworkers, and leaves her library job at the earliest opportunity. Reynier's Claire sometimes works weekends and cannot live in the charming but expensive neighborhoods she would like to call home, but she also knows and loves books and computers, wanting to make the treasures of her library available to users.

The ways the library profession is represented in mass market detective fiction is only one dimension of the image of the librarian, yet these narratives still have the potential to either obscure the nature of the librarian's role through the evocation of stereotypes – as is done in the Teagarden books – or to enhance the librarian's image – as is the case in the Claire Reynier books – showing applied problem-solving. As libraries function in challenging social and economic environments, facing the need to recruit future librarians, to make decisions about access to information, and to meet the difficulties of limited budgets, which representations of the librarian will enable readers to understand our profession and its responsibilities? Which librarian-sleuth's adventures do we want to recommend to our readers, and in turn, which image of the librarian best recommends us to them?

FOOTNOTES

¹ Mysteries featuring the librarian as amateur detective also include Miriam Grace Monfredo's nineteenth-century librarian Glynis Tryon; Kate Morgan's Dewey James, a small-town librarian; Elizabeth Peters' Jacqueline Kirby, an academic librarian. For a fuller list of mystery titles featuring librarians, one source is Lake County's "Where There's a Book, There's a Librarian" Web page at www.lakeco.lib.in.us/library_lovers_month.htm.

² Roma M. Harris, *Librarianship: Erosion of a Woman's Profession* (Norwood, N.J.: Alex Publishing Corp., 1992), 3.

³ Marie L. Radford and Gary P. Radford, (2003). "Librarians and Party Girls: Cultural Studies and the Meaning of the Librarian." *The Library Quarterly*, 73(1), 54-69.

⁴ "The portrayal of a librarian as young, energetic, and friendly would be meaningful only against the prevailing negative stereotype of the librarian as an aging, scowling spinster" (p. 325) in Gary R. Radford and Marie L. Radford, (2001). "Libraries, Librarians, and the Discourse of Fear. *The Library Quarterly*, 71(3), 299-329.

⁵ Hans Prins and Wilco de Gier with Russell Bowden, *The Image of the Library and the Information Profession/ How We See Ourselves: An Investigation* (New Haven: KG Saur, 1995), 21, IFLA Publications 71.

⁶ Charlaine Harris, *Real Murders* (New York: Walker Publishing Company, 1990), 2.

⁷ Harris, *Real Murders*, 2.

⁸ Charlaine Harris, *A Bone to Pick* (New York: Walker Publishing Company, 1992), 131.

⁹ Harris, *Real Murders*, 81.

¹⁰ Harris, *Bone to Pick*, 67.

¹¹ Harris, *Real Murders*, 59.

¹² Harris, *Real Murders*, 3.

¹³ Harris, *Real Murders*, 69.

¹⁴ Harris, *Bone to Pick*, 4.

¹⁵ Roe's only description of her education occurs in this passage where she describes her friendship with another character named Amina: "I'd grown up with her and remained best friends through college." Harris, *Real Murders*, 58.

¹⁶ Harris, *Real Murders*, 79.

¹⁷ Harris, *Real Murders*, 79.

¹⁸ Harris, *Bone to Pick*, 133.

¹⁹ Harris, *Real Murders*, 57-58.

²⁰ Harris, *Real Murders*, 85.

²¹ Harris, *Real Murders*, 87.

²² Harris, *Bone to Pick*, 33.

²³ Harris, *Real Murders*, 88.

²⁴ In the second book in the series, Roe inherits a house and an accompanying small fortune, allowing her to resign her position at the financially troubled local public library.

²⁵ Judith Van Gieson, *The Stolen Blue* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 2.

²⁶ Van Gieson, *Stolen Blue*, 3.

²⁷ Van Gieson, *Stolen Blue*, 1, 63-64.

²⁸ Van Gieson, *Stolen Blue*, 2.

²⁹ Van Gieson, *Stolen Blue*, 30.

³⁰ Van Gieson, *Stolen Blue*, 30.

³¹ Van Gieson, *Stolen Blue*, 2.

³² Van Gieson, *Stolen Blue*, 33.

³³ Van Gieson, *Stolen Blue*, 33.

³⁴ Van Gieson, *Stolen Blue*, 38.

³⁵ Van Gieson, *Stolen Blue*, 8.

³⁶ Van Gieson, *Stolen Blue*, 8-9.

³⁷ Van Gieson, *Stolen Blue*, 12-13, 25.

³⁸ Van Gieson, *Stolen Blue*, 64-65.